

The Roles of a Chemical Officer in Iraq

By Captain Andrea M. Tix

While deployed to Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), I served in two positions in the 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized): support platoon leader and battalion logistics staff officer (S-4). These positions were not the traditional roles that Chemical officers fill, but I am grateful for the opportunity that I was presented. The experience has given me a broader perspective as a leader and a greater appreciation for the duties of all Soldiers—regardless of their military occupational specialty (MOS).

After arriving in Iraq, I was tasked to reorganize my platoon to form a battalion quick-reaction force (QRF). The QRF had to be capable of conducting combat patrols and first-response missions, in addition to providing battalion maintenance, recovery operations, and logistics support. The support platoon contained the largest diversity of MOSs in the battalion, ranging from cooks, fuelers, and truck drivers to specialized mechanics. Within two weeks of receiving my mission, my platoon was conducting successful operations in sector. The missions ranged from QRF operations to security checkpoint guards on a roadway known to have improvised explosive devices. All the while, I still had a team of mechanics and a recovery team working relentlessly in the motor pool to ensure that all battalion vehicles were operational. Every day was a learning experience! Although my Soldiers were not assigned to combat arms MOSs, they were completing tasks in a combat role. As a leader, I had to ensure that they were trained and ready to meet the challenge.

Because training time was limited, it was vital to conquer critical tasks first. And we had to continually change our tactics, techniques, and procedures to ensure that our actions were not predictable to the enemy. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of rehearsals and thorough precombat checks and inspections. I also had to empower my noncommissioned officers (NCOs) because it was just not possible for me to be everywhere leadership was needed. The operating tempo in the platoon was high, and personnel knew how to work well under pressure to excel in the highly fluid combat environment of Iraq. I learned so much as a leader!

After a few months in theater, I was reassigned to the battalion S-4 position. Again, I was placed in a nontraditional Chemical role. Because I had no formal

logistics training, I relied on my past experience as a support platoon leader to help me integrate into my new position. The duties of the S-4 section were diverse, so I valued the experience and expertise of my staff (three NCOs and one enlisted Soldier) and the crucial role they played in completing the battalion mission. As the principal staff element responsible for coordinating supply, maintenance, and transportation for the battalion and its augmenting units, we ensured that all units and sections had the assets they needed to operate. Due to the nature of the battalion mission and the uniquely skilled sections, we had to support many uncommon and complex unit requirements.

Even though we were not directly involved in combat patrols, each day brought new challenges and requirements to the S-4 section. Our days consisted of coordination with our companies and staff, other battalions and, particularly, the brigade support battalion. I quickly learned how crucial it is to network and coordinate with your counterparts. I also learned how critical it is to trust and empower NCOs. The years of experience and knowledge that my noncommissioned officer in charge brought to the table were vital in making our section successful. Without my staff, I could not have stayed on top of the numerous daily requirements necessary to resource the battalion with mission-essential items.

Having occupied the position of battalion S-4, I can now view the role from a new perspective. I fully understand how a unit operates. There are so many moving “pieces” on so many levels. It is necessary for personnel at all levels—enlisted Soldiers, NCOs, and officers—to work together and share knowledge. All personnel are vital to accomplishing the mission in Iraq!

All officers should be prepared to fill roles wherever their leadership is needed, regardless of the branch worn on the uniform. I never imagined that a Chemical officer would have the opportunity to serve in so many different roles. But I am grateful for the experience and will carry the knowledge I gained with me to future assignments. 🇺🇸

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